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*Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554*

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

In the Matter of)
)
Preemption of State and Local Zoning and)
Land Use Restrictions on the Siting,)
Placement and Construction of)
Broadcast Station Transmission Facilities)

MM Docket No. 97-182

COMMENTS OF HARRY J. PAPPAS, STELLA A. PAPPAS, AND SKYCOM, INC.

John Griffith Johnson, Jr., Esq.
David D. Burns, Esq.
Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP
1299 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Tenth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004-2400
Telephone: (202) 508-9500

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SUMMARY

Harry J. Pappas and Stella A. Pappas (the “Pappases”) and Skycom, Inc. (“Skycom”) have attempted to construct a new television station in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin for approximately ten years. Their efforts to do so have been consistently impeded by the actions of state and local authorities who have opposed the construction of the station’s proposed tower for a variety of reasons, all of which: (a) have been decided in favor of the Pappases and Skycom by federal regulatory bodies expert in such matters, (b) are not appropriate for consideration by such authorities, and/or (c) are not reasonable in relation to the federal interests in making broadcast service available to the public and in promoting competition in mass media services.

The Pappases and Skycom believe that the rules proposed by the petitioners in this proceeding will aid broadcasters significantly in their efforts to serve the public by delivering free, over-the-air broadcast service, and urge the Commission to adopt such rules.

COMMENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

Harry J. Pappas and Stella A. Pappas (collectively, the "Pappases"), holders of the permit issued by the Commission to construct commercial television station WMMF-TV, Channel 68, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin (File No. BPCT-870610KN, as modified), and Skycom, Inc. ("Skycom"), a Wisconsin corporation wholly owned by the Pappases, by counsel and pursuant to Section 1.415 of the Commission's Rules, hereby respectfully submit their Comments in response to certain aspects of the Commission's *Notice of Proposed Rulemaking* (the "NPRM"), MM Docket No. 97-182, released August 19, 1997.

In the NPRM, the Commission invites comment generally on the proposal by the National Association of Broadcasters and the Association for Maximum Service Television (collectively, the "Petitioners") that the Commission adopt rules providing for the preemption of certain state and local restrictions on the siting and construction of broadcast transmission facilities. The Pappases and Skycom support the proposals of the Petitioners. In addition, the Commission specifically requested that commenters provide information with respect to their experiences with state and local authorities in connection with the process of constructing broadcast transmission facilities. Because of the Pappases' and Skycom's experiences in attempting to construct television station WMMF-TV, the Pappases and Skycom believe that they can impart useful information to the Commission in this regard.

II. STATE AND LOCAL OPPOSITION TO CONSTRUCTION OF THE WMMF-TV TOWER

A. State Impediments to Construction

In June, 1987, Skycom (then owned by John and Elizabeth Stebbins, who subsequently sold their interests in Skycom to the Pappases) applied to the Commission for a construction permit to build television station WMMF-TV on Channel 68 in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin (File No. BPCT-870610KN).^{1/} The grant of the construction permit was delayed due to opposition to the proposed tower for the station (the "Tower") by the Experimental Aircraft Association (the "EAA") and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (the "WDOT"). That opposition was based upon air navigation safety concerns. Skycom has reason to believe, however, that the opposition actually derived from the fact that the EAA holds its annual pilots' "fly-in" in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and that the presence of the Tower would require that EAA pilots attending the annual "fly-in" make some minor deviations in their flight patterns.

In an effort to minimize any potential adverse effects on air navigation, Skycom agreed to reduce the height of the Tower from a proposed 2,000 feet above ground level ("AGL") to 1,706 feet AGL. Nevertheless, the WDOT, in concert with the EAA, continued to oppose the Tower.

In July, 1987, following a contested hearing in which the WDOT participated, the Federal Aeronautical Administration (the "FAA") issued a Determination of No Hazard to Air

^{1/} In May, 1995, the construction permit was assigned to the Pappases pursuant to the Commission's consent granted in File No. BAPCT-941116KK. The Pappases also purchased all the stock of Skycom, which continues to hold certain state authorizations in connection with the Tower. For simplicity, the Pappases and Skycom will be referred to collectively as "Skycom".

Navigation (Aeronautical Study No. 86-AGL-954-OE) with respect to the Tower (the “No Hazard Determination”). The WDOT petitioned the FAA to reconsider the No Hazard Determination, but the FAA refused to do so. In July, 1989, on the basis of the No Hazard Determination, the Commission issued a construction permit to Skycom (the “Construction Permit”) to build television station WMMF-TV.

Meanwhile, Skycom was seeking a permit from of the WDOT’s Bureau of Aeronautics to construct the Tower, pursuant to Wisconsin Statutes section 114.35. Not surprisingly, the WDOT initially denied its approval in January, 1989. However, in a contested hearing on Skycom’s application, the hearing officer for the Wisconsin Commissioner of Transportation determined that the Tower would not have a significant adverse impact on air navigation and proposed issuance of the section 114.35 permit to Skycom. The Commissioner adopted the hearing officer’s determination, with minor changes. The WDOT unsuccessfully appealed to the Circuit Court and ultimately to the Wisconsin Court of Appeals to overturn the Commissioner’s determination. In December, 1991, the Wisconsin Court of Appeals issued its decision affirming the decision of the Commissioner, and in January, 1992, the Bureau of Aeronautics granted Skycom a section 114.35 construction permit

In January 1993, the EAA, the WDOT, and the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (“AOPA”) attempted further to hinder Skycom by filing informal objections to Skycom’s application for extension of the Construction Permit (File No. BMPCT-921222KF). The Commission staff denied the informal objections.

In July, 1997, AOPA again attempted to hinder construction of the Tower by filing a letter with the FAA requesting that the FAA void the No Hazard Determination and undertake a new aeronautical study with respect to the proposed Tower's impact on air navigation. Skycom considers this request to be groundless, inasmuch as the No Hazard Determination was issued after a thorough FAA study of all relevant factors and after a contested hearing. Skycom has filed a response with the FAA, objecting to AOPA's request and asking that it be denied.

Skycom believes that the EAA and AOPA, in combination with certain officials of the WDOT, have used the state administrative process in order to hinder and delay the construction of the Tower. In Skycom's opinion, these activities have not been based upon any genuine concern for air navigation safety, but by a desire on the part of certain private pilots to retain their preferred air routes during the EAA's annual Oshkosh fly-in. The continued efforts by the EAA, the WDOT and AOPA to oppose Skycom through inappropriate means -- such as opposition to Skycom's application to the Commission to extend the Construction Permit, and AOPA's recent filing with the FAA requesting that the FAA re-open the No Hazard Determination -- give credence to Skycom's suspicions.

Regardless of the motivation of those opposing Skycom, it is abundantly clear that the Tower constitutes no significant danger to air navigation. The FAA issued its No Hazard Determination on the basis of a fully developed record. In addition, the Wisconsin Commissioner of Transportation also determined, following a contested hearing, that the Tower posed no significant air navigation hazard, and this determination was upheld by the courts. The Commission issued its Construction Permit to Skycom in July, 1989. Due to the determined

opposition of the EAA and AOPA, Skycom was not able to secure the WDOT construction permit until 1992, and then only after expending considerable effort and resources in opposing the WDOT.

In fact, the costs of litigating against EAA, AOPA, and WDOT largely exhausted Mr. and Mrs. Stebbins' personal resources. Had the Pappases not elected to purchase the Stebbins' interests in the Construction Permit, it is probable that WMMF-TV would have been stillborn and the litigiousness of the parties opposing the Tower would have been vindicated, to the detriment of the public of Fond du Lac and environs. Even to this day, eleven years after the Stebbinses initiated their efforts to bring a new television service to the community, Fond du Lac and its surrounding communities are still waiting for that television service.

B. Municipal Impediments to Construction

Construction of the Tower for station WMMF also has been impeded by the actions of municipal authorities. In December, 1994, Skycom filed a petition with the Town of Elba, Wisconsin to rezone the land on which the Tower is to be built. The Elba Plan Commission recommended that Skycom's petition be denied, and this recommendation was upheld by the Elba Town Board. In July, 1995, Skycom filed a writ of certiorari with the Circuit Court of Dodge County seeking review of the Town Board's decision. In April, 1996, the Circuit Court upheld the Town Board. Skycom appealed the Circuit Court's decision to the Wisconsin Court of Appeals. In September, 1997, the Court of appeals, in a per curiam decision, affirmed the Town Board's denial of the rezoning requested by Skycom.

In rejecting Skycom's petition for rezoning, the Town Board provided no reasons of its own for doing so, but merely relied on the report and recommendations of the Plan Commission. The Plan Commission appeared to base its recommendations on three principal criteria: (a) that the Tower would have a negative impact on air navigation, (b) that the Tower would have a negative impact on migratory birds, and (c) that the programming which the Station would broadcast via the Tower would not be beneficial to the community.^{2/} As Skycom has pointed out in its pleadings before the Circuit Court and the Court of Appeals, these assertions are unsupported by the facts or the record, and the Board has exceeded its authority in considering these criteria in making its determination.

More significantly for the Commission's purposes, however, each of these criteria involves an area which is not within the scope of legitimate local land-use concerns. The FAA issued the No Hazard Determination after making a full review of the record and a contested hearing. The Commission issued the Construction Permit after a determination that the construction of the Station would serve the public interest with respect to Fond du Lac, Wisconsin and the surrounding communities, which include Elba. In short, these issues have been fully considered and addressed by federal agencies that are specifically charged with

^{2/} In one of its findings, the Plan Commission asserted that "[o]ne more television channel is not a benefit to the community; there are enough television channels now." Memorandum in support of Plaintiff's Dispositive Motions at 15 in Konkel, et. al., vs. Town of Elba Town Board, State of Wisconsin Circuit Court for Dodge County, Case No. 95-CV-337 (quoting Plan Commission's findings).

statutory duties to regulate, and that possess considerable expertise in, the subject matters in question.^{3/}

As regards the Plan Commission's assertion that the Tower would pose a threat to migratory birds, in a letter to Skycom the United States Fish and Wildlife Service stated, in essence, that there would be no significant adverse impact to either migratory birds or endangered species of birds, provided that the Tower was marked in a manner similar to marking requirements already imposed with respect to the Tower by the FAA. In addition, a representative of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (the "WDNR"), who appeared at the Plan Commission hearings, did not indicate that the Tower would be any more hazardous to birds than any other tall structure, and stated that the WDNR had no authority to prevent the construction of tall structures such as the Tower. As with air safety and the question of whether the community "needs" another television channel, the issue of the impact of broadcast towers on migratory wildlife is one that should not be addressed by local zoning authorities who lack the expertise to do so in an informed manner.

The Plan Commission also based its recommendation, in part, on its findings that the construction of the Tower would jeopardize the use of land for exclusively agricultural purposes

^{3/} The Plan Commission's consideration of whether another television channel is needed in the Town of Elba also raises First Amendment concerns regarding the extent to which government may regulate commercial speech. It is doubtful that the Plan Commission's conclusory findings in this regard would meet the appropriate Constitutional tests. In any event, neither this Commission -- nor, a fortiori, a local municipal zoning authority -- can base a decision on a perception by government that there are "enough" speakers and that another speaker (e.g., a television station) would be superfluous. But even if such a conclusion were Constitutionally supportable, it would far exceed the Elba Town Board's legitimate interest in protecting the zoning plan of the community.

and would constitute an “eyesore.” While the Town Board has a legitimate interest in maintaining the agricultural character of land, to the extent reasonably possible, the Board has acted unreasonably in this case. As Skycom has shown, only about one acre of land would be removed from agricultural use by construction of the Tower. This is much less than the amount of land lost to agricultural use by recent rezoning approvals of the Board. The Plan Commission’s findings that the Tower would constitute an eyesore are so vague and subjective that they are entitled to be given little, if any, weight. If municipalities are allowed to withhold their consent to the construction of broadcast facilities on such flimsy grounds as these, broadcasters will continue to confront enormous obstacles to siting such facilities and the long-anticipated “roll-out” of digital television service will be jeopardized. It is worth noting that agricultural areas are frequently the most logical places to site towers, due to the paucity of residents and the lower costs of land in such areas.

It is clear that the Plan Commission and the Town Board engaged in a conclusory fact-finding exercise in considering Skycom’s petition for rezoning. The grounds for denying the rezoning and land-use permit for the Tower cited by the Commission and Town Board are factually spurious or utterly beyond the legitimate jurisdictional concern and expertise of such authorities. The Petitioners’ proposal would go a long way toward alleviating the type of unwarranted obstruction posed by the Plan Commission and the Town Board of the Town of Elba, by requiring local authorities to show that their regulations with respect to broadcast facilities are reasonable in relation to accomplishing clearly-stated health or safety objectives and that such objectives are consistent with the federal interests in broadcast transmission and fair and effective competition among electronic media.

III. CONCLUSION

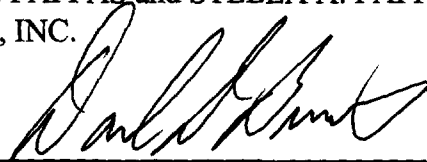
Since 1987, Skycom has attempted to bring to Fond du Lac its first television broadcast service. Its efforts to do so, however, have been thwarted by well-organized opponents pursuing their own individual agendas and by state and local authorities which have exceeded their regulatory authority. By virtue of quasi-judicial and judicial authority, Skycom has been able to overcome opposition at the state level. However, due to the very high level of deference paid by the Wisconsin courts to local authorities on zoning issues, Skycom has not yet been able to overcome the local authorities' opposition.

Skycom believes that the proposals made by the Petitioners represent a fair balancing of the legitimate interests of state and local authorities with the needs of broadcasters to bring television service, including digital television service, to the public and the public's right to receive such service. Skycom and the Pappases urge the Commission to adopt the Petitioners' proposal.

Respectfully submitted,

HARRY J. PAPPAS and STELLA A. PAPPAS
SKYCOM, INC.

By:



John Griffith Johnson, Jr.
David D. Burns
Their Counsel

Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker LLP
1299 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Tenth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004-2004
Telephone: (202) 508-9500
Facsimile: (202) 508-9700

October 30, 1997

Certificate Of Service

Sharon L. Henry, a secretary in the law firm of Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker, LLP, hereby certifies that she has on this 30th day of October, 1997, caused copies of the foregoing **"COMMENTS OF HARRY J. PAPPAS, STELLA A. PAPPAS AND SKYCOM, INC."** to be mailed to the following by first-class United States mail, postage prepaid:

Henry L. Baumann, Esq.
Barry D. Umansky, Esq.
National Association of Broadcasters
1771 N Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

Victor Tawil
Association for Maximum Service Television
1776 Massachusetts Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

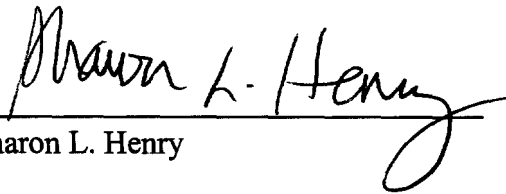
Wade H. Hargrove, Esq.
Mark J. Prak, Esq.
Brooks, Pierce, McLendon, Humphrey & Leonard, L.L.P.
P. O. Box 1800
Raleigh, NC 27602

Melissa K. Bailey
Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association
421 Aviation Way
Frederick, MD 21701

Robert T. Warner
Experimental Aircraft Association
P. O. Box 3086
Oshkosh, WI 5903-3086

Joseph Maafen
Wisconsin Department of Transportation
4802 Sheboygan Avenue
Madison, WI 53705

Richard Lehmann, Esq.
Boardman, Suhr, Curry & Field
One South Pinckney St.
Madison, WI 53701
(Attorney for the Town of Elba)


Sharon L. Henry